

Basel – then and now

• By YEDIDIA STERN

Although Israelis report being happy on a personal level, they take a critical attitude toward the state and to what is happening in Israel's public sphere. A bitter cloud hovers over our public life, which is indeed not without flaws. But from time to time an opportunity arises for us to raise our heads above the daily fray and look at our bigger picture, as a country and as a society. Next week such a moment will occur: the Jewish people will celebrate the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress, held in Basel, Switzerland.

Today's Israel is a direct product of what transpired over three days at the Basel Municipal Casino at the end of the 19th century. Theodor Herzl, who initiated the Congress, sought to arouse national sentiment and consciousness among Jews, and his success in doing so animates Israeli society to this day. Zionism prior to the Congress was based on local organizations. In those three days, Zionism coalesced as a global movement, which enabled it to become a player in the international arena and assert the claim for recognition of the Jewish people's right to self-determination and sovereignty in the Land of Israel.

Most of the national movements founded over the past 200 years did not arise within democratic frameworks; in many cases, they emerged from fratricidal wars and enormous bloodshed. Not so with us: The Basel Congress bequeathed to Zionism and, later, the State of Israel, the democratic way.

A representative election system was established there, and elected institutions were established that constituted an organizational infrastructure for the movement's continued operation. This was a remarkable achievement considering that most of the delegates came from non-democratic states. Some saw Herzl as a "messiah," and many at the Congress called him a "king," but the actual proceedings were completely democratic.

The spirit of Basel – a huge awakening of Jews taking Jewish destiny into their own hands while defining goals, objectives and plans of action – was movingly expressed at the time by the British writer Israel Zangwill: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept as we remembered Zion. By the rivers of Basel, we resolved to weep no more."

Herzl was imbued with prophetic spirit: a few days after the Congress, he wrote in his diary the famous words: "At Basel I founded the Jewish state."

He refrained from saying it publicly, fearing anger on the part of the great powers of the time – the Russian tsar and the Turkish sultan – as well as "being answered with universal laughter." But he goes on to say, "perhaps in five years, and certainly in 50 years, everyone will know it." Exactly 50 years elapsed until 1948.

Many historians agree that Zionism is one of the most successful national movements of the modern era, if not the most successful of all. The post-Zionists and anti-Zionists raise their voices, but the facts speak for themselves: the goal of Zionism, as defined at the First Zionist Congress – "establishing for the Jewish people a publicly and legally assured home in Eretz Israel" – has been fully realized and is the Jewish world's most important development of the past 2,000 years.

BUT THE anniversary of the Congress provides us not only the chance to celebrate past achievements, but also an opportunity to address future challenges for Zionism and the Jewish people. The pre-state Zionist thinkers expected that with the establishment of the state, the puzzle of Jewish identity would be solved. The identity difficulties of their own day were attributed to the fact that the Jews were scattered across the world without a significant center, to their lack of a common language, organized institutions or national leadership. The establishment of a state – territory, ingathering of exiles, national institutions, the revival of Hebrew – was thought to be the solution. In this, they were wrong.

On the contrary, when the Jewish people achieved their own state, a struggle began over the character of the state and the public space within it. If in the diasporic past each community chose its own path, and no consensus decision was required; now we have a single shared public space and must make decisions about its nature, and the appropriate conduct within it, that apply equally to all. The identity clashes have intensified and are at the root of Israeli discord, the expressions of which are also political.

Moreover, the identity struggles within Israel also reflect, in a negative way, on the relationship between Israeli and Diaspora Jews. Religion and state issues, for example, bring this into sharp relief. Additionally, having a Jewish state raises new issues and new disputes unknown to previous Jewish generations. One important example is how the Jewish state should comport itself regarding its large national minority – Israeli

Arabs.

I don't think there is any point in trying to smooth over the differences. Any attempt to shape a common identity – as Ben-Gurion tried to do when the state was established – is doomed to failure today. Disagreement – between Jews in Israel, between Jews in the Diaspora, and between Israeli and Diaspora Jews – must be recognized as a fact of life. Indeed, the era of identity politics is not unique to Israeli or Jewish society; it is a global phenomenon.

The unwillingness of individuals and communities to adopt a shared narrative and a single vision is a product of the general mindset of our time. The challenge is to find a way to live together – while realizing the Zionist dream – despite the controversies.

Our ideological discord also has a positive potential – playing on a phrase from Ecclesiastes, a kind of "wealth hoarded by its owner to his benefit." Disagreement is a stirring and stimulating force that keeps us vital and dynamic. "Letting a hundred flowers bloom" is a more apt image than the melting pot. What might have been appropriate when the state was being built cannot be appropriate for the liberal Israel of today.

And yet, if we are to enjoy the advantages of plurality, and not be defeated by its disadvantages, we must work hard at shaping agreements on how to manage our disagreements. This is the great challenge of Israeli society today.

The realization of Herzlian Zionism created a flourishing state. But the identity controversy casts a curse on us. We are like the powerful Gulliver who, while asleep, was tied down by the tiny but grotesquely arrogant Lilliputians and rendered immobile.

The Lilliputians are the agents of the present Israeli discord, which, once again, is in itself worthy and valuable. The Lilliputians are the ones attacking the fabric of our shared life – by delegitimizing others, including state institutions – and thus denigrating the magnificent spirit of cooperation that turned the Basel Congress into the seed from which the State of Israel sprang.

We need a new Herzl and a new Zionist Congress, not for the purpose of establishing a state or defining identity, but to breathe the spirit of solidarity and Jewish brotherhood into an era of strife.

The writer is president of the Jewish People Policy Institute and will speak on the subject of Jewish solidarity at the upcoming Basel conference on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress.